

132 Genesis – a glorious panorama

More thoughts based on John Walton's book, *The Lost World of Genesis One* [130,131].

Once again, I can't go into the details of Walton's careful exegesis, but remember that it's based strongly on trying to understand the meaning of the words *as the author spoke/wrote and his hearers heard*, i.e. in the cultural context of their time and **not** in the culture of our time.

Walton's main focus is Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 but he briefly broadens to include the whole of Genesis. His claim is that the book is divided into 12 parts, using the literary feature "This is the account of...", so I checked against my NIV Study Bible; yes, they confirm it as a literary feature but their "literary outline" is rather different:

- I. Introduction (1:1–2:3)
- II. Body (2:4–50:26)
 - A: "The account of the heavens and the earth" (2:4–4:26)
 - B: "The account of..."
 - ...
 - J: "The account of Jacob" (37:2–50:26)

But an introduction plus ten "accounts of" is **eleven** parts. Whoa! is Walton mistaken? I checked by searching for "The account of", and those words actually appear **eleven** times, not **ten**. The NIV notes ignore the fact that Esau's story is divided into two parts, the second being "The account of Esau...in the hill country of Seir".

Walton doesn't make a big issue of this, but if we took his analysis of Genesis, the Study Bible's "literary outline" would become, quite simply, a list of **twelve** "accounts" – and twelve, of course, is much more "Old Testament" than ten or eleven. Like it!

More importantly, turning back to my Study Bible, they explain what scholars have long believed (and Walton agrees): there are the literary parallels between days 1, 2 and 3 and days 4, 5 and 6, and the themes they see as parallel are:

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| (1) "light" | (4) "lights" |
| (2) "water" | (5) "every living creature in the water" |
| (3) a. "dry ground" | (6) a ₁ . "livestock" |
| | a ₂ . "man" |
| b. "vegetation" | b. "every green plant" |

Not exactly a snappy and easy-to-assimilate overview – if I'd produced that as a way to communicate God's act of creation, the marketing boys wouldn't have been very impressed!

Walton's view? He sees (1) to (3) as establishing the basic **functions** of the cosmos and (4) to (6) as establishing the '**functionaries**' – maybe we could say the 'moving bits' of the cosmos (my words, not Walton's).

So Walton's interpretation sees (1) to (3) as establishing the basics of what mankind is going to need in order to function in this human-focused cosmos: (1) **time**, (2) **weather** – *water* systems

from below and above the earth (remember, to the ancients there was water *above* the sky, held back by the **firmament**, and water below which bubbled up) and (3) **food production** on the *dry land* (reading verses vv. 3–13, I think makes sense). With those three functions working – time, weather, food – mankind could function and prosper.

(A supplementary point is that while other ANE cosmologies are about how humans have to provide food for, and to serve, the gods, our wonderful Creator is more concerned about how **He** can provide food for **us**. Yes, God is going to inhabit this cosmos-temple [131], but God's concern is to care for us, his special creation. Having seen God-in-Jesus, do you see how God's selfless, serving, loving character is displayed in creation? Luvvit!)

So then, Day (4) is the creation of those **elements that mark out time**: sun, moon and stars, (5) is the **creatures** that live and prosper within the cosmos (the water and the sky), and (6) “Let the land produce living creatures” (not good science, but remember it's not a scientific document), so it's the **creatures** on the dry land and their reproduction – and humankind is part of that system of creatures that reproduce.

How much clearer and more elegant is this pattern than those in the NIV notes. Why is their view so complicated? They are desperately trying to force Genesis into being a material view of creation, which was never the author's intention!

Oh, how God must grieve over the generations of people who, as scientific knowledge has mushroomed, have turned their backs on Jesus because we have wrongly tried to insist on Genesis being a **material** description of creation. We have ended up caught in the dilemma of “creation OR evolution” – a total non-issue, as Walton explains in the latter part of his book.

And finally today, what about the issue of the two different versions of creation that Genesis gives us: 1:1 to 2:3 and 2:4ff. Scholars have tied themselves in knots over this – again because they see it materially instead of functionally.

So, Walton's view is that the former gives us a first way of looking at creation: God took the chaos and darkness and made it all **function** so that it was all **very good** (remember, Walton believes that the Hebrew word, which we translate ‘good’, means something more like ‘functioning well’). That's all very fine, but it's not enough; we need another way of seeing it because the first hearers well knew that, looking around, it's really not ‘good’ anymore; it's not functioning properly.

So then Genesis 2:4ff explains **why** it's not functioning properly – and it's not God's fault! This second “account of the heavens and the earth, when they were created” sees things from a different angle, to contrast “good functioning” and “sin”.

The two accounts are two ways of looking at creation and are provided for different purposes. That is how we need to read them. If we mess around trying to square them as two different *material* accounts, it just ties us in knots and we end up totally missing the point of why they were written! What's more, in doing so we can often alienate the next, more scientific generation from the things of God.